

THE STORY OF VIRGINIA: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

<http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/americans.htm>

Becoming Americans

The American Revolution was fought over a fundamental issue of authority. Where does the consent of the governed lie, and who is entitled to rule? By 1775 most Virginians doubted the legitimacy of centralized power exercised from afar. It was alien to their own long experience. Constitutional quarrels, however, seldom arise from purely theoretical concerns about the distribution of power. There must be specific grievances.

Prelude to War and Independence

After 1763, Great Britain underestimated the economic and political maturity of the American colonies, which already had the highest standard of living in the world and more freedom than the king's subjects in the mother country. Nonetheless, Great Britain's attempt to compel the colonies to pay part of the cost of their defense in the French and Indian War inaugurated a series of escalating quarrels over whether or not taxes could be levied by colonial assemblies or by the government in London. A pamphlet war ensued in which the respective powers of these bodies was argued. The political consensus broke down irrevocably, however, when the colonies maintained that their provincial assemblies were their only legislatures, not Parliament in London. Was it reasonable that men of the quality of [George Washington](#) and [Thomas Jefferson](#) could never aspire to sit in a legislature that claimed absolute authority over their lives?

Virginia declared itself independent on May 15, 1776, and three weeks later Richard Henry Lee introduced a resolution of national independence at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Once enacted, a document announcing the fact to the world was deemed appropriate. Congress entrusted this work to a committee, which asked Thomas Jefferson to prepare a draft. The resulting [Declaration of Independence](#) defined the American Revolution as an anti-colonial struggle for independence and a revolution in thinking about the nature of government itself. Although the Declaration put forward the revolutionary ideas of men being "created equal" and of being free and able to enjoy the "pursuit of happiness," it meant white men, and the new nation's founding on principles of liberty and equality eventually doomed conditions that oppressed women and blacks.

The Revolutionary War

One noteworthy early engagement in the war was the battle of Great Bridge. On December 9, 1775, Lord Dunmore's army of British regulars, American Tories, and a large contingent of former slaves was defeated by Virginia militiamen, whose ranks included troops from [Patrick Henry](#)'s first regiment. Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech had inspired both American patriots and the enslaved Virginians who enlisted in Dunmore's army. In 1781, as Lord Cornwallis moved his army toward Yorktown, British raiders wrecked havoc throughout the Tidewater, and reached as far west as Charlottesville.

Although Massachusetts had played as great a role as Virginia in bringing about the Revolution, the Old Dominion had the predominant role in formulating the new nation. [George Mason's](#) Virginia Declaration of Rights of June 1776 (which Thomas Jefferson paraphrased in the Declaration of Independence) was the pattern for the federal Bill of Rights. James Madison is called "The Father of the Constitution." Thomas Jefferson's [Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom](#) was the most sweeping legislative call for freedom of conscience. John Marshall made the Supreme Court a co-equal branch of government. Virginians served eight of the first nine presidential terms. The first president of the new nation, chosen unanimously by the Electoral College, was George Washington.

African Virginians

What of the hopes and aspirations of African Virginians during this period? Thomas Jefferson did not intend his rhetoric about liberty and equality in the Declaration of Independence to apply to them, but they heard it nonetheless. Like whites, they were divided by the Revolution, unsure of the path to freedom. In November 1775, royal governor [Lord Dunmore](#) had proclaimed freedom to any slave who left his master to fight for the king. Thousands did, and white Virginians were appalled. The Commonwealth of Virginia (as it had been called since 1776) acted ambivalently. On the one hand, in 1778 Virginia became the first government in the world to ban the African slave trade. But two years later the legislature voted to reward Revolutionary War veterans with 300 acres and a slave. The irony of fighting for liberty while owning slaves had troubled some whites during the Revolution and when, in 1782, the General Assembly allowed slaveowners to free their slaves, a minority did. But outright abolition seemed too costly, and the momentum for reform died out. Some blacks decided to act on their own. In 1800 and 1802 they planned rebellions but were betrayed by informers. In 1831, [Nat Turner](#) organized another slave revolt, symbolically scheduled for July 4, in which between 55 and 60 whites were killed.

Women and Education

American women, too, hoped to gain freedom from the Revolution. Only very gradually, however, did the Revolution's expansion of the idea of freedom uplift the status of women. Some free women benefitted from the concept of "republican womanhood," which led to the creation of schools for young white women appearing all over Virginia. The goal of these schools was neither careers for women nor their participation in the public arena. Women had to combat the attitude of men, such as William Wirt, who held that "the ostentatious display of intellect in a young lady is revolting." Nevertheless, they did establish the social acceptability of the formally educated woman in Virginia, and once that idea was accepted, the prospects for future change were incalculable.

Women also organized to establish orphanages and other charities. But there were countercurrents. Women, who traditionally had been seen as inferior to men in mind and body, now were seen as superior to men in some respects—more virtuous, religious, and high-minded—but they were expected to exercise these soothing influences at home, not in the outside world. Women also became the mainstay of the churches and of the many church-based organizations.

Religious Freedom

The Church of England in Virginia to some seemed dry and lifeless. A longing for more emotional religion than Anglicanism then offered led to increased numbers, first of Presbyterians, then of Methodists and Baptists. Although most Anglicans in Virginia supported the Revolution, the state formally disestablished the church in 1786 and disendowed its lands in 1802. From near extinction it took the name Protestant Episcopal Church in 1789 and gradually revived.

The principle of religious freedom affirmed in the 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights, and the support for freedom of conscience set forth in the 1786 [Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom](#), constituted the most radical result of the American Revolution. James Madison was instrumental in getting these ideas into the "First Amendment," that is, the first of ten amendments to the United States Constitution collectively known as the Bill of Rights.

With the end of state-supported religion, Baptists and Methodists most successfully combined religious enthusiasm with the ideology of egalitarian republicanism. By 1850, Methodists and Baptists owned three-quarters of Virginia's churches and numbered in their ranks the great majority of white churchgoers and nearly all black churchgoers.

Most second- and third-generation African Virginians adopted Christianity in the 1700s. Nearly all became evangelicals, mostly Baptists (who welcomed them), and others who stressed the influence of spirits in everyday life, divine healing, and emotional experiences as reflections of God's presence. Black evangelicalism, however, was rooted in West African spirituality, and gradually diverged from the more conservative white variety. After the slave revolts of 1800 and 1802, mixed race churches gradually segregated, and free blacks formed their own congregations, while slaves often worshiped in secret "hush hollows." The issue of slavery had not gone away, and as Virginians addressed a new century—the nineteenth—with hope for the promise of their new nation, the dark cloud of slavery still hovered.